



The Poison of Enthusiasm

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*«I was resolved not to be an enthusiast in philosophy,
while I was blaming other enthusiasms»*

David Hume, letter to Henry Home,
December 2, 1737¹

RESUMEN: Una de las interpretaciones más frecuentemente formuladas respecto de la conexión que históricamente se ha dado entre el liberalismo y el empirismo, en la Europa moderna —y más particularmente en la Gran Bretaña—, supone que dicha relación pasa decisivamente por la separación entre hechos y valores, entre lo descriptivo y lo evaluativo. El pluralismo y la tolerancia que el liberalismo pretende implicar solamente pueden apoyarse en la al menos relativa separación de los valores del mundo fáctico donde predomina el criterio de verdadero-falso.

Michael Rosen, actualmente profesor del Lincoln College de Oxford, quiere poner a prueba esa interpretación en un caso histórico concreto: el del “entusiasmo” religioso en algunas confesiones cristianas, y los análisis epistemológicos y socio-psicológicos que diversos autores efectuaron de dicho fenómeno. De entre ellos se hace expresa referencia a Hobbes, Locke, Adam Smith y otros, pero muy especialmente a David Hume, autor de un intento único de construcción de una teoría capaz de interconectar las creencias, las emociones y la organización social.

La conclusión de la prueba, según Rosen, es la extremada simplificación que la tesis examinada contiene, por cuanto —en el tema analizado— la presunta separación no se realiza. Esta constatación no menoscaba la importancia que tal división ha tenido en la filosofía empirista, pero su protagonismo tuvo lugar en época bastante posterior a la previamente supuesta.

Is there a connection between liberalism and empiricism? Historically, at least, the supposition seems more than likely. The emergence in early modern Europe (Chiefly

¹ J. H. Burton, *Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, 2 Vols. (Edinburgh, 1856) Vol. I, p. 64.

in Britain) of the characteristically liberal approach to politics coincided almost exactly with the development of empiricism in epistemology. Indeed, a single figure, John Locke, was of central significance in both developments. It is hard to believe that the association was merely coincidental.

What is more, a simple and obvious argument for the connection suggests itself at the level of ideas. Liberalism is a doctrine of pluralism: it remains, to use a familiar phrase, «neutral between competing conceptions of the good». But is it rational to be neutral? If questions about what is good could be true or false, then surely it would be *wrong* to treat different views as being of equal weight. On the other hand, if such questions are not questions of fact at all, then there appears to be no reason why one view should be privileged over another. Thus, it is argued, the empiricist distinctions between facts and values supports the liberal approach to politics.

This argument is, of course, consistent with a familiar criticism of liberalism: that liberalism defends the plurality of values only at the price of undermining what it seeks to defend; that it compromises the value itself.²

In this paper I propose to put this very simple model to the test in relation to a specific issue: the nature of enthusiasm. Enthusiastic religion represented a pressing social problem for the political thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Moreover, it was a problem which clearly had an epistemological dimension. For what was distinctive about the enthusiasts was not just what they believed but the basis on which they claimed to believe it: the authority of direct divine revelation. The intellectual response to religious enthusiasm illustrates, I believe, how apparently quite abstract epistemological reflections may carry a latent political dimension.

I

Liberalism was not the direct political expression of Protestantism in the way that Scholastic political theory had been the application of Catholic theology —early Protestantism was in obvious ways a conspicuously illiberal phenomenon.³

It would be better to see liberalism as the product of the political problem which the Reformation represented. As Protestantism showed itself to be neither (as the Roman Church has hoped) a transient sectarian movement, nor (against the hopes of its own founders) a thoroughgoing movement for renewal within the Church, it became clear that religious pluralism was to be a permanent feature of the Western European political order. How was it to be accommodated?⁴

² «Liberalism more largely, for all its achievements, or as a kind of necessary constraint on those achievements, has been parasitic not only on older institutions and communities. And these latter it has progressively undermined. For liberalism is above all a doctrine of liberation». M. Walzer, *Radical Principles: Reflections of an Unreconstructed Democrat* (New York, N. Y.: Basic Books, 1980), p. 97.

³ «Luther, Zwingli and Calvin alike desired to establish inclusive churches and to support them with civil power, to make admission a matter of form and law and even to enforce membership». J. W. Allen, *A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 41.

⁴ «That a diversity of rival and incompatible conceptions of the good should obtain the allegiance of a variety of contending parties was from now on increasingly to be taken for granted. The practical question became rather: What kind of principles can require and secure allegiance in and to a form social order in which individuals who are pursuing diverse and often incompatible conceptions of the good can live together without the disruptions of rebellion and internal war?» Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

In essence, the liberal strategy is one, as one might call it, of «depotentialisation». If shared religious belief no longer provides a plausible foundation for political order, the answer is not to search for ways to re-established uniformity (the conservative strategy) but to find a basis for political order which bypasses the need for it. There are two main elements in this process. First, an examination of the possibility of an individualistic foundation for political obligation. Second, a reassessment of the status of religious belief and its social consequences. Together, the two elements help to initiate a vision of a new form of political society, based on social pluralism and the protection of rights.

The problem of what, other than a shared religiously based morality, was to hold together the political community, was first diagnosed in the writings of Machiavelli and Hobbes. Both writers saw several reasons to be sceptical about the political role of Christian morality. It was unreasonably dangerous, they argued, for a society to rely on its citizens behaving, by and large, as Christian morality told them they ought.

For Hobbes, the «natural passions» of men, being «contrary to justice», must be overridden by «terror of some power».⁵ The subject is denied the entitlement to follow his own conscience with regard to right and wrong («because the Law is the Publique Conscience, by which he hath already undertaken to be guided»);⁶ individuals do not even have the capacity to make judgements regarding their own long-term self-interest.⁷ Religion is to be tightly controlled by the sovereign for the sake of public safety. While, for the scholastics, «an unjust law is no law», for Hobbes there is no independent political standpoint from which the justice or injustice of a law may be judged. In general, to place any limitation on the sovereign's power is, Hobbes insists, given that the preservation of order is the overriding end, to deny him the means necessary to that end.

Liberalism in the centuries that followed challenged every one of Hobbes's social doctrines. Yet the basis on which it did so remained recognisably indebted to him. The liberals' quarrel was not with his assertion of the primacy of public safety but with his assessment of its requirements. It is here that the second element in the liberal strategy, the rethinking of the nature and status of religious belief, comes to the fore. Where Hobbes sees the need for state-imposed uniformity, the liberals' arguments deny its political necessity. What he sees as divisions need be, they argue, no more than diversity.

II

Locke, in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, does not deny that the magistrate is responsible for the preservation of civil peace and that he may therefore intervene in religious matters insofar as they represent a threat to it. But, Locke argues, this does not imply that the magistrate should seek to impose uniformity. On the contrary, it is the attempt by churches to establish religious monopolies which is itself, in fact, the

⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by C.B. MacPherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 224.

⁶ Hobbes, *op. cit.*, p. 366.

⁷ «For all men are by nature provided of notable multiplying glasses, (that is their Passions and Self-love), through which every little payment appeareth a great grievance; but are destitute of those prospective glasses, (namely Morall and Civil Science), to see a farre off the miseries that hang over them, and cannot without such payments be avoyded». Hobbes, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

fundamental cause of religious strife. Diversity of religious belief is natural, Locke thinks, even among Christians — the scriptures do not uniquely determine a particular set of doctrines and practices. Moreover, the attempt to impose uniformity will prove counterproductive.

The difficulty for Locke's position is easy to see: it may be apparent to Locke and those of a similarly tolerant disposition that, given the limitations of human cognitive capacities, certain knowledge is out of the question in matters of religious dispute. But what about those believers who are prepared to suffer martyrdom for their convictions? Will they be prepared to regard their doctrines as matters on which reasonable men might have different opinions?

As the most recent editor of the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, James Tully, has pointed out, Locke had before him here the evidence of recent history.⁸ The example of Protestant martyrdom showed that post-Reformation man would suffer and die before submitting to religious practices at odds with his own inner convictions.

From Locke's perspective, two religious groups present a particular difficulty for the advocate of toleration: Catholics (because they aim at a monopolistic form of religion with doctrinal interpretation based upon institutional authority) and «enthusiasts» — who claimed to draw their religious doctrine directly from divine inspiration.⁹

The name «enthusiasm» was applied initially to those «God-possessed» Protestants, the Anabaptists (known in German as *Schwaermer*).¹⁰ Although Martin Luther himself

⁸ Introduction to John Locke, *A Letter concerning Toleration* (1689), edited by J. Tully (Indianapolis, In.: Hackett, 1983), p. 6.

⁹ «There are two projects particularly dear to [Locke's] heart: the first to advocate, if only within limits, religious toleration; the second, to undermine one particular sort of religion, 'enthusiasm', fanaticism, yet without weakening religious faith». J. Passmore, «Locke and the Ethics of Belief», Dawes Hicks Lecture, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. LXIV (1978), pp. 185-208, p. 186. The idea that there is a similarity between Catholicism and extreme Protestantism is, of course, politically very understandable in the context of England after the end of the Commonwealth. It is one of the themes of George Hickes's sermon «The Spirit of Enthusiasm Exorcised» (1680, published London, 1709) and is continued in Hume's essay «Of Superstition and Enthusiasm».

¹⁰ By the time of Kant, however, enthusiasm and *Schwaermerei* were clearly distinguished — at least in German.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word appears first in English in 1579, with no pejorative sense but meaning direct, divine possession. The *OED* illustration of the pejorative connection between *enthusiasm* and extreme Protestantism comes from Hickman's history of 1674 (surely too late) while the first indication of the more modern sense of enthusiasm (as inspiration and vigour of spirit, particularly in connection with aesthetics) comes from Dryden (1693) who writes of poetry operating «by a kind of enthusiasm or extraordinary emotion of soul».

But in other languages this sense appears to be earlier and fundamental. *The Historisches Woerterbuch der Philosophie* (Basel: Schwabe, 1972), Article: «Enthusiasmus», locates it as a part of the Renaissance theory of poetry (to be found in L. Giacomini, *Del Furor Poetico*, for example) while Werner Kraus, «Ueber franzoesisch 'enthusiasme' im 18. Jahrhundert», in *Werk und Wort. Aufsätze zur Literaturwissenschaft und Wortgeschichte* (Berlin-Ost, 1972) pp. 178-204 cites Ronsard (1548) as its earliest appearance in French. The German term «Begeisterung» seems never to have had the negative sense of «enthusiasm» (that was reserved for *Schwaermerei*) and to relate back directly to the Platonic theory of inspiration. The negative sense at issue in this paper was still being used in English, however, in the 1840s by Emerson.

had justified his actions in rebelling against Rome and breaking his monastic vows on the ground that he had received a divine summons, by the seventeenth century, in the opinion of the sociologist, Kai Erikson, «no item stood higher on the Puritan list of heresies than the Claim that God revealed himself directly to men.»¹¹ God may have spoken directly to Abraham (even commanding him to commit a terrible crime) but that was before the Word of God had been published in its final form in the Scriptures. Where those professing to speak with divine authority appeared within Puritan societies they were repressed with furious savagery.

Erikson provides a striking illustration of this during the course of the trial of Anne Hutchinson in Massachusetts in 1637. The trial had been dealing with Mrs Hutchinson's alleged subversion of the authority of the clergy and had become involved in what was evidently (even by the standards of the time) a highly abstract discussion regarding the doctrine of the «covenant of grace». At this point, however, Erikson says,

It was Anne Hutchinson herself who came to the court's rescue... [She] suddenly launched into a long account of her own life and ended the recital by declaring that her insights were a result of direct revelation.

The judges immediately fastened on this:

MR. NOWELL: How did you know that this was the spirit?

MRS. HUTCHINSON: How did Abraham know what it was God did bid him to offer his son, it being a breach of the sixth commandment?

DEP. GOV. DUDLEY: By an immediate voice.

MRS. HUTCHINSON: So to me by an immediate voice.

DEP. GOV. DUDLEY: How? An immediate revelation?

MRS. HUTCHINSON: By the voice of His own spirit to my soul.¹²

This was clearly «devilish delusion»; «it is», said Gov. Winthrop, «the most desperate enthusiasm in the world».¹³

For the sanctimonious Puritans of New England, matters were simple enough: whoever disagree with them clearly deluded, and such delusions could be of devilish inspiration. For Locke, however, the moral is a different one: to pretend to infallible knowledge through divine inspiration is to make a claim which, in the nature of the case, cannot be substantiated and which is, to boot, highly dangerous. It is this argument which I will now examine.

¹¹ K. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans*, (New York, N. Y.: Wiley, 1966), p. 98. Nigel Smith has pointed out to me that this is an oversimplification: that there was in fact a spectrum of views concerning the nature of revelation and its location. Those who believe in direct personal revelation (the «immediate voice») are at one extreme. One common position appears to have been to deny that direct revelation *now* is a part of the Christian experience in the way that it had been in the early Church—that the «age of miracles» is past. See, for example, Hickes's «The Spirit of Enthusiasm Exorcised».

¹² *Wayward Puritans*, p. 97.

¹³ *Wayward Puritans*, p. 99.

III

Locke only became a defender of toleration at a comparatively late stage in his career. Earlier, he had taken a position which came much closer to Hobbes's: the magistrate ought to determine the form of religious observance for the sake of civil peace.¹⁴ But the central premise is the same in both arguments. Locke draws on a distinction brought to prominence by Hooker between those religious doctrines which are fundamental questions of faith and reason and those which are «things indifferent». In the case of «things indifferent», Hooker and the earlier Locke argued, since the issue was not something which could be definitely determined either by reason or revelation, it was open to the magistrate to prescribe practice.¹⁵ Later, however, Locke came to believe that for that very same reason these matters were to be left to the individual and his conscience.

One can see that, if knowledge is impossible in matters of religious belief, then a simple argument for the limits of toleration can be constructed: all beliefs should be tolerated except those which lay claim to (certain) knowledge and, hence, to exclusivity. But, in fact, Locke does believe that there can be religious knowledge: the existence of God, for example, is something which, he argues, can be given demonstrative proof.¹⁶

Thus Locke's is essentially a *rationalist* argument for toleration. It has two ingredients. First, there is the claim that there is a range of issues about which disagreement is reasonable and where tolerance of diversity is thus appropriate. Second, there is the idea that beliefs should have no claim to toleration which are irrational —not, it should be noted, in the sense that the beliefs themselves are *intrinsically* irrational (as regards their content) but because the belief is irrationally held.

Locke's epistemology enables him to draw the necessary distinctions. He starts from a quasi-Cartesian conception of knowledge. The highest degree of certainty attainable by us is the direct perception of the relation of ideas. This part of our knowledge is, Locke says, «irresistible, and like the bright Sun-shine» It:

¹⁴ Tully in his Introduction to the *Letter concerning Toleration* points out that Locke's position in the *Two Tracts*, was not, however, one in favour of religious uniformity. Although the presumption is in favour of the prescription of religious practice by the magistrate, Locke seems to have been concerned to support the authority of the tolerant (because pro-Catholic) Charles II against attempts to impose strict religious discipline by the Anglican Church. Thus the authority of sovereign functions as a counterweight to the monopolistic tendencies of an established church.

¹⁵ «Hooker was really concerned only to show that refusal to obey duly constituted authority is justified only when the command given is demonstrably contrary to the law of God or the law of reason». Allen, op. cit., p. 194.

¹⁶ But Locke *does* take the position that the intolerant should not themselves be tolerated: «These therefore, and the like, who attribute unto the Faithful, Religious and Orthodox, that is, in plain terms, unto themselves, any Peculiar Privilege of Power above other Mortals, in Civil Governments; or who, upon pretence of Religion, do challenge any manner of Authority over such, as are not associated with them in the Ecclesiastical Communion; I say these have no right to be tolerated by the Magistrate; as neither those that will not own and teach the Duty of tolerating All men in matters of meer Religion». Locke, op. cit., p. 50.

... forces it self immediately to be perceived, as soon as ever the Mind turns its view that way; and leaves no room for Hesitation, Doubt, or Examination, but the Mind is presently filled with the clear Light of it.¹⁷

Such intuitive certainty is foundational, insofar as it sets the goal for our wider cognitive activity. Proof, for example, is the attempt to supply by argument such intervening ideas as may be necessary in order to make the relation between ideas (which was not immediately apparent) intuitively certain. But, for Locke, the extent of certain knowledge is quite limited. It includes mathematical knowledge, intuitive knowledge of our own existence, and the direct evidence of sense, as well as some basic theorems of morality and theology (including demonstrative proof of the existence of God). Beyond that, however, we are in the domain of probability, not knowledge.

In this case, the important point is that: «[t]hat which makes me believe, is something extraneous to the thing I believe».¹⁸ But here, too, the ideal of knowledge as intuitive certainty represents the guiding principle according to which probable reasoning ought to be directed. For where we take beliefs to be probable this has two kinds of grounds: first, there is conformity with what we actually do know, and, second, there is the warrant that we give to the testimony of others.

On this view, it is not unreasonable to believe on the basis of revelation. For, if there is a benevolent Creator —and this, Locke believes, is demonstrable— then it is not implausible that he should make his will known directly to men. And such communication must be accorded the highest weight, being «the Testimony... of such an one, as cannot deceive, nor be deceived».¹⁹

What God reveals is incontrovertible. But what is by no means incontrovertible is the belief *that* God has revealed a particular belief as true. While beliefs themselves may be justified by the inner light, there is no inner light which can show us that belief in a belief which is not intrinsically evident can be certainly true. Thus the existence of revelation must be itself be submitted to the standard of probability. This is not to say that God cannot reveal as true what is to us highly improbable, but only that our belief that such a thing is a revelation must be based on external standards of evidence, not internal ones of certainty:

... Faith is a settled and sure Principle of Assent and Assurance, and leaves no room for Doubt or Hesitation. Only we must be sure, that it be a Divine Revelation, and that we understand it right: else we shall expose ourselves to all the Extravagancy of Enthusiasm, and all the error of wrong Principles, if we have Faith and Assurance in what is not divine Revelation.²⁰

¹⁷ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by P. H. Nidditch, (Oxford: O.U.P., 1975), p. 531.

¹⁸ Locke, op. cit., p. 655.

¹⁹ Locke, op. cit., p. 667.

²⁰ Locke, op. cit., p. 667.

This is where the enthusiast goes wrong. Faith cannot convince us of anything which contradicts our knowledge because «the Mind of Man can never have a clearer... Evidence of any thing to be a divine *Revelation*, as it has of the principles of its own Reason». ²¹

The Enthusiast claims evidence on the basis of an internal light, but «light in the Mind» cannot relate to anything but the intrinsic evidence of the truth of a proposition; it cannot be evident independently of it:

In all that is of Divine *Revelation* there is need of no other Proof but that it is an inspiration from GOD: For he can neither deceive nor be deceived. But how shall it be known, that any Proposition in our Minds in a Truth infused by God; a Truth which is revealed to us by him, which he declares to us, and therefore we ought to believe? Here it is that Enthusiasm fails of the Evidence it pretends to. For Men thus possessed boast of a Light whereby they say, they are enlightened, and brought into the Knowledge of this or that Truth. But if they know it to be a Truth, they must now it to be so either by its own self-evidence to natural Reason; or by the rational Proofs that make it out to be so. ²²

Reasonable belief may extend beyond knowledge, but what is not reasonable is to extend the standard of knowledge itself. The enthusiast might argue that he has not done this: he has only widened the application of Locke's notion of the «Clear Light». If it is true that we perceive by a clear light that two and two are four or that there is a red patch before our eyes, why should it not equally be clear to someone that they are being addressed by the Deity?

Exactly this claim was made by one Walter Cradock in a work called *Gospel-Holinesse* (1651). Cradock argues that:

... for as in natural things, you know, that by the same light whereby I see the sun, by the same light I know that I see him: So there is in the very manifestation of God to the soule, it carries a witnesse in it self, it is so cleare that when I have it, though I never had it before, and I cannot demonstratively speak a word what it is, yet I know as it is Gods sight, so I know as I see him. ²³

Put like this, the gap between Locke and the enthusiast might appear to be small: the enthusiast simply extends the range of material which meets the criterion of the «clear light». But there is, Locke believes, an epistemological principle at stake here. What would be involved in accepting the enthusiast's claims, and why Locke resists them so vehemently, would be to allow that there could be evidence for a belief which was purely extrinsic —evidence, that is, which could not in some way be connected back to the belief's *intrinsic* plausibility. To accept this would be to contradict the principle that belief on evidence is prior to belief on authority (in the sense that authority is justified only if it embodies evidence in an indirect form) and this principle is fundamental to Locke's vindication of the rights on individual human reason.

²¹ Locke, op. cit., p. 693.

²² Locke, op. cit., p. 702.

²³ Walter Cradock, *Gospel-Holinesse* (1651) p. 32, quoted in A. A. Coppins, *Religious Enthusiasm from Robert Browne to George Fox* (D. Phil., Oxford, 1983), p. 219.

On the face of it, Locke's argument against the enthusiast might be formulated like this: no second-order proposition of the form «'p' is true» can be self-evident unless the first-order proposition «p» itself is. Such a claim might appear to follow from Locke's commitment to the «way of ideas». If knowledge is, as Locke says, a matter of grasping the «connexion and agreement» between ideas,²⁴ then, by a sort of «atomic principle», our grasp of the relations within a second-order proposition cannot be detached from our grasp of the relations within any first-order proposition which it contains. Hence the second-order proposition could not be evident if the first-order one were not evident also.

But this argument does not work for two reasons. First, it commits Locke to a claim which is far stronger than the should be prepared to make. The «atomic principle» just mentioned would amount to the claim that we cannot have knowledge of the relations between ideas whose own (internal) relations we did not fully know. If that were so, however, it would imply that we could not know any propositions about God without knowing all the necessary truths about his nature, or know any necessary properties which a mathematical object may have without knowing all such properties. That way madness lies —or Leibniz.

What is more, this way of stating the argument misrepresents the position of Locke's opponent. The enthusiast is not, in fact, claiming that, though a proposition itself is not self-evident, its truth is. His position is something more like a syllogism:

(1) Whatever is told me by God is certainly true. (This premise is accepted by both Locke and the enthusiasts).

(2) God has told me *p*.

(3) Therefore, *p* is certainly true.

Since the form of the argument is trivially valid, its weight rests on (2), which the enthusiast claim is a matter of direct experience. In that case what is at issue does not depend on the distinction between first and second-order propositions at all. For Locke must surely concede that I can know a proposition of the form «X told me *p*» without knowing whether *p* is true. (I can know that «John told me that he couldn't find my house» is true without knowing whether what John told me was itself true or whether he was simply inventing an excuse for his being late). So the question is: could I ever directly know that God has told me something? If so, then I have *internal* evidence for a proposition of the form «X told me *p*» which, in conjunction with the principle of God's veridicality, provides good indirect evidence for *p* itself. The question of external evidence for *p* does not arise.

Locke's claim must be that I could not recognise God's voice just from the experience of hearing it (in the way that I might recognise a duck-billed platypus when I see it, never having seen one before). This does seem to be the implication of the account he gives of our idea of God, which he describes as the idea of a «complex idea of substance» which transcends «any thing, we can perceive in ourselves by *Reflection*, or discover by *Sensation* in other things».²⁵ But since, on the other hand, Locke allows

²⁴ Locke, op. cit., p. 525.

²⁵ Locke, op. cit., p. 317.

that we can have direct (and, presumably, self-identifying) awareness of our own willing and thinking, even though nothing in the external world corresponds to them, why, the enthusiast will ask, could we not have such awareness of the Spirit moving within us? Rather than applying an epistemological principle, Locke, in excluding the possibility of an immediate awareness of the Spirit, would appear to be assuming his conclusion.

But even if there are flaws in the specific arguments Locke gives in the chapter «Of Enthusiasm», the general principle he defends—the priority of belief on evidence over belief on authority—may now seem to us simply a matter of epistemological common sense. If so, then Locke and his contemporaries have achieved the most conclusive kind of historical victory available to philosophical doctrines: one which suppresses the awareness of an alternative in those who come after.

For, at the time that Locke was writing, an alternative view was seriously and widely canvassed. As the work of Richard Popkin and others has shown, the founders of modern epistemology wrote against a background of arguments defending faith as a ground for belief which was independent of (and perhaps, indeed, contrary to) reason and evidence. This is the point of view, for example, of those who combined philosophical scepticism with commitment to religious authority—a position which Popkin describes as «fideist».²⁶ For the fideist, unaided human reason is unable to make good even its own claims to knowledge, much less to be in a position to challenge the immediate authority of revealed religion.²⁷

On the face of it (and according to his own convictions) the enthusiast such as Cradock is wholly in line with Locke on this question: human beings must decide knowledge-claims according to their own internal standard of the «clear light», not by external authority. Locke's argument, on the other hand, would place the enthusiast in the same category as the fideist. The enthusiast, he claims, introduces a standard for knowledge which transcends (and, potentially, is in conflict with) the ordinary procedures of rational argument and investigation—although in this case the standard is the Protestant one of direct illumination rather than the Catholic one of established ecclesiastical authority.

Locke's account of enthusiasm, then, attempts to draw a line between divergences of belief which are reasonable and those which are not in the name of a unified conception of human reason. But why do people come to be «possessed» by such irrational beliefs? And what remedies are there?

«[The] Mind if it will proceed rationally, ought to examine all the grounds of Probability, and see how they make more or less, for or against any probable Propo-

²⁶ «Those whom I classify as fideists are persons who are sceptics with regard to the possibility of our attaining knowledge by rational means; without our possessing some basic truths known by faith (i. e. truths based on no rational evidence whatsoever)». R. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1979) p. xix.

²⁷ Thus when Locke writes: «*Credo, quia impossibile est: I believe because it is impossible*, might, in a good Man pass for a Sally of Zeal; but would prove a very ill Rule for Men to chuse their Opinions or Religion by», Locke, op. cit., p. 696, he is rejecting a view which was forcefully held by many of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors.

sition, before it assents to or dissents from it», Locke writes in the chapter «Of Probability». What keeps us on this path of reason, he goes on to claim in the chapter «Of Enthusiasm», is a «love of Truth».²⁸

J. A. Passmore in «Locke on the Ethics of Belief» sees a contradiction here. Indeed, he argues that this latter claim by Locke «entirely disrupts the argument he has so far developed and continues to develop in the chapter which now succeeds it». The reason, he says, is that «Locke now begins to describe rational belief not in terms of a purely intellectual weighing-up but rather in terms of a certain form of passion—the love of truth».²⁹ I must admit that I do not see the force of this objection. Locke appears only to be defending the view—surely not an unreasonable one—that it is up to us to put ourselves in a position to gather the best evidence we can in advance of making a judgement. The love of truth, if we have it, is what motivates us to take those active steps. It does not affect the «weighing-up» itself; it determines (to continue the metaphor) how energetically we search for the materials that we put in the scales.

In the penultimate chapter of the *Essay* Locke classifies the reasons why the «love of truth» may prove to be insufficient to prevent us from assenting «contrary to probability». Of the four counteracting causes identified, three (corresponding, roughly speaking, to ignorance, stupidity and laziness) lead people to omit the necessary investigation prior to judgement and so to be unaware of the evidence available. There is no contradiction here with the picture of the act of judgement itself as a passive weighing-up.

The fourth case dealt with by Locke—what he calls «wrong measures of probability»—may, however, seem to support Passmore's charge of inconsistency, for in this case non-rational factors do intrude on judgement: our emotions affect not just our willingness to gather evidence but our assessment of the probabilities themselves.

But I do not see that even this has to be incompatible with a view of judging as basically «weighing-up».³⁰ The fact that we may misperceive the weight of certain factors for emotional reasons does not make the process of judgement itself less passive. Locke can consistently maintain *both* that we do indeed, when we judge, passively register the greatest *apparent* weight of probabilities *and* that, for emotional reasons, we misperceive the true weight of one or more of the ingredients in our calculation.³¹

²⁸ Locke, op. cit., pp. 656, 697.

²⁹ Passmore, op. cit., p. 204. The chapter «Of Enthusiasm» was added by Locke to the fourth edition of the *Essay* and so might perhaps be expected not to be wholly consistent with what precedes and succeeds it.

³⁰ Even if there were an inconsistency here, however, this would evidently not support Passmore's claim that the inconsistency was introduced into Locke's argument by the inclusion in later editions of the *Essay* of the chapter «Of Enthusiasm».

³¹ I suspect that Passmore exaggerates the passivity of Locke's view of judgement because, in talking about Locke's account of «rational belief», he does not differentiate sufficiently sharply between what Locke has to say about *knowledge* (in regard to which we are, indeed, when the necessary conditions are present, supposed to be completely passive—there is no «decision to believe») and what he has to say about *judgement* and *opinion*, in relation to which we take a more active role and which is where the «love of truth» comes in.

But, though it is not inconsistent for Locke to allow that emotional factors may intrude on judgements about matters of fact, what he has to say about the way in which they actually do so offers little help in explaining the origins of irrational religious belief: Locke contents himself with conventional platitudes on the subject, of no particular relevance to the problem of religious enthusiasm:

Tell a Man, passionately in Love, that he is jilted; bring a score of Witnesses of the Falshood of his Mistress, 'tis ten to one but three kind Words of hers, shall invalidate all their Testimonies. *Quod volumus, facile credimus; what suits our wishes is forwardly believed*, is, I suppose, what every one hath more than once experimented...³²

When it comes to the psychology of rationality and irrationality, Locke has little to say: in general, he is content to show enthusiasm's epistemological distinctiveness and to leave the matter there.

IV

Alongside Locke's epistemological approach to enthusiasm there was, however, an increasing tendency in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to view enthusiasm, superstition, primitive religion and related phenomena from the point of view of what Frank Manuel has called «psychopathology».³³

The idea that enthusiasm was principally a matter of medical, not theological or philosophical concern can already be found in that source of so much that is characteristic of seventeenth-century English thought, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621).³⁴ Hobbes, too, mentions enthusiasm in Chapter Eight of the *Leviathan* («Of Man») as a species of madness. Similarly, the Anglican theologian, Meric Casaubon, published *A Treatise concerning Enthusiasm* (1655) with the subtitle: *As it is an effect of nature: but is mistaken by many for either Divine Inspiration, or Diabolical Possession*.

Casaubon's subtitle is significant. To represent enthusiasm as a medical or psychological problem is, of course, to disqualify it from a legitimate hearing in the sphere of reasonable debate and, to that extent, constitutes an intolerant response. But, in the seventeenth-century context, this must be set against the kind of savage repression traditionally practised by Christians against those whom they considered to be heretics and blasphemers.

That advocates of the medical approach to enthusiasm were well aware of the contrast between their attitude and the fiercer forms of clerical reaction is made clear, for example, in the «Epistle to the Reader» of Henry More's *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus* (1656). More presents an ironic dialogue between a first-person interlocutor and the author:

³² Locke, *op. cit.*, p. 715. Locke does not, for example, consider why anyone should want to believe what is not the case: does the disappointment in the long term not more than outweigh the pleasures of short-term illusion?

³³ See F. Manuel *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard U.P., 1959), Ch. 3, Section III, «A Psychopathology of Enthusiasm».

³⁴ R. Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (London: Dent, 1977), Part III, p. 341.

I asked him if it seemed not something maimed in the enumeration of the *Causes of Enthusiasme*, because there is nothing set down there concerning the Devil, nor the wilfull wickednesse of the mind of man; but all is resolved into *Complexion* or the present Temper or Distemper of the body, arising from natural causes that necessarily act thereupon. For thus this Discourse, said I, may seem as well an *Excuse for*, as *Discovery* of this disease of *Enthusiasme*. Why, said *Mastix*, I hope it is not your designe, I am sure it is not mine, to incense the mindes of any against *Enthusiasts* as to persecute them: all that I am at, is only this, that no man may follow them.³⁵

Although Casaubon undertakes a typology of the different forms of enthusiasm — divinatory, contemplative and philosophical, rhetorical, poetical and precatory — he does not, however, go far towards offering a causal hypothesis regarding its origins. It is only at the beginning of the eighteenth century that writers on enthusiasm begin to move towards a differentiated psychological account of the phenomenon.

A short work of this kind is Trenchard's *Natural History of Superstition* (1709), which, according to Manuel, Hume himself probably perused (certainly the title is close enough to Hume's own *Natural History of Religion*). The *Natural History of Superstition* is an essay, as Manuel puts it, of «Deism militant».³⁶ Trenchard diagnoses enthusiasm as due to a blockage of communication with the real world,³⁷ when «the Organs of Sense (which are the Avenues and Doors to let in external objects) are shut up».³⁸ The natural connection between the mind and the world thus being dislocated, there is a compensatory stimulation of the imaginative faculties.

More important for the contemporary image of enthusiasm, perhaps (and certainly more entertaining) are the satirical essays by Swift «A Tale of a Tub» and «A Discourse concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit» (1704) in which Swift examines the «*Fanatick Strain, or Tincture of Enthusiasm*; which improved by certain Persons or Societies of Men, and by them practised upon the rest, has been able to produce Revolutions of the greatest Figure in History».³⁹

According to Swift:

Whosoever pleases to look into the Fountains of *Enthusiasm*, from whence, in all Ages, have eternally proceeded such fatning Streams, will find the Spring Head to have been as *troubled* and *muddy* as the Current; of such great Emolument is a Tincture of this *Vapour*, which the World calls *Madness*, that without its Help, the World would not only be deprived of those two great Blessings, *Conquests* and *Systems*, but even all Mankind would unhappily be reduced to the same Belief in Things Invisible.⁴⁰

³⁵ Henry More, *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus*, in *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings of Dr Henry More* (London, 1712).

³⁶ Manuel, op. cit., p. 72. «The Natural History of Superstition» in *A Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts on the most Interesting and Entertaining Subjects*, Vol. III (London, 1748), pp. 206-222.

³⁷ An idea, according to Manuel, he takes from Bayle.

³⁸ Quoted, Manuel, op. cit., p. 76.

³⁹ *A Tale of a Tub and other Satires*, ed. by K. Williams (London: Dent, 1975), p. 174.

⁴⁰ Swift, op. cit., p. 107.

For Swift, enthusiasm is either a form of madness or, more commonly, a fraud performed on the gullible by means of human vanity for essentially selfish purposes.⁴¹

These, then, were the two main strands of thought about enthusiasm current in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: the attempt to draw a dividing-line on the epistemological level between the claims of the enthusiasts and reasonable religious belief, and the identification of enthusiasm as a form of psychological pathology.

Locke's critique of enthusiasm, as we have seen, developed from his rationalist epistemology. But, for those who are less sanguine about the possibility of a rationalist account of knowledge, the idea of a clear dividing-line between reasonable belief and enthusiasm might seem to be more remote. For a sceptic like Hume all too many of our beliefs lack a foundation in reason. Are we then, in Hume's view, in no better case than the «gloomy, hair-brained enthusiast» himself?⁴² Not necessarily.

The fact that Hume holds that there is no foundation in reason for certain beliefs should not lead us to attribute to him the «theory that belief is not only natural, but also essentially irrational».⁴³ By assumption, of course, we do not have an account which explains us as forming our beliefs *for rational reasons alone*, but that does not mean that they are arbitrary. In the first place, Hume *does* have a theory of rational belief, both in the sense of an account of the kinds of belief which it is reasonable to hold and of the processes and procedures (that is to say, involuntary and voluntary factors) which favour the formation of reasonable beliefs.

What is more, the attempt to look at beliefs and their formation from a «naturalistic» perspective can have its own kind of normative content. The nature which «by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well to breathe and feel» is, by and large, beneficent and well-ordered.⁴⁴ Indeed, Hume points out, it is actually *better* that we should form many of our beliefs by instinct, rather than having to rely on the slow and often uncertain processes of reasoning.⁴⁵

41 «So there is one fundamental Point, wherein they are sure to meet, as Lines in a Center, and that is the *Community of Women*: great were their Sollicitudes in this Matter, and they never fail'd of certain Articles in their Schemes of Worship, on purpose to establish it... For Human Life is a continual Navigation, and, if we expect our *Vessels* to pass with Safety, thro' the Waves and Tempests of this fluctuating World, it is necessary to make a good Provision of the *Flesh*, as Sea-men lay in a store of *Beef* for a long Voyage». Swift, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

42 Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Sect. IX, Part I, in David Hume, *Enquiries*, Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1975), p. 270.

43 This, according to David Fate Norton, is the interpretation of «Kemp Smith and his followers», *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P., 1982), p. 16, although this seems to me an ungenerous view of Kemp Smith. See N. Kemp Smith *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1941).

44 Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: O.U.P., 1968), p. 183.

45 «It is more conformable to the *ordinary wisdom of nature* to secure so necessary an act of the mind, by some instinct or mechanical tendency, which may be infallible in its operations, may discover itself at the first appearance of life and thought, and may be independent of all the labour'd deductions of the understanding. As nature has taught us the use of our limbs, without giving us knowledge of the muscles and nerves, by which they are actuated; so she has implanted in us an instinct, which carries forward the thought in a correspondent course to that which she has established among external objects; though we are ignorant of those powers and

Thus the subject of irrational belief does not simply fall by the wayside for Hume. On the contrary, the simple (some would say, simplistic) mechanism of association allows Hume to develop (1) a naturalistic account of error (2) an account of interaction of belief and emotion in the genesis of false belief, and, finally, (3) in outline at least, an account of the connection between false belief and social circumstances. In this way, Hume brings together and unifies for the first time the two kinds of response to religious enthusiasm.

V

Hume's essay «Of Enthusiasm and Superstition» itself is, it must be admitted, a slight piece of work. But, read in the light of the later *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), it makes clear how far Hume had gone in extending the theory of association developed in the *Treatise* to deal with the social problem of irrational belief.

The origin of enthusiasm and superstition, according to Hume, lies in the intrusion onto the formation of our beliefs of our hopes and fears (respectively). The beliefs which are formed in this way are not sheer hallucinations, however. The imaginative mechanism in operation corresponds rather to what would, in modern terms, be called a theory of *projection* or *fetishism*.⁴⁶

«There is», writes Hume:

an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice or good-will to every thing, that hurts or pleases us.⁴⁷

Let us examine this passage from the point of view of the theory of association. According to Hume, although ideas are associated by resemblance, contiguity and causation, impressions are associated solely by the principle of resemblance, and so, presumably, it is resemblance that initially moves us to identify the impression of a certain «figure» (say, the shape which corresponds to the shape of a human face) with what it commonly resembles, namely, the idea of a face.

The error in this is one of interpretation: to believe that whatever *looks like* a face is a face (in the sense of conforming to whatever empirical laws govern faces). A more

forces, on which this regular course and succession of objects totally depends». *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Sect. V, Part 2, in Hume, op. cit., p. 55, my emphasis.

It is true, as a famous letter to Hutcheson makes clear, that Hume had reservations about the extreme kinds of teleological argument then current. But one does not have to believe that everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds in order to find some causal connections beneficent: this, I believe, is what is implicit in Hume's phrase about: «the ordinary wisdom of nature».

⁴⁶ The latter term is, if Manuel is right, not so anachronistic. The general use of the term «fetishism» to refer to animistic religious belief comes from Hume's French contemporary Charles de Brosses's *Du Culte des Dieux Fetiches*, a work which Manuel claims to have been directly inspired by Hume, and which was the source for Marx's famous concept of the «fetishism of commodities». If that is so, then Hume has some right to be seen as one of the progenitors of the modern theory of ideology.

⁴⁷ Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, edited by H.E. Root (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford U.P., 1985), p. 29.

refined judgement, based on causality will enable us to amend our classification so that we judge that what we see is a face-shaped heavenly body, conforming to the laws governing heavenly bodies, not the face of some person in the sky. On this view, then, error lies in endorsing the immediate consequences of the principle of association, rationality the revision of immediate generalisations in the light of more extensive and systematic data. Since this process is indefinite, the difference between truth and error becomes one of degree.

In this way, Hume answers an objection to his naturalistic account of the human mind which he considers in Book One of the *Treatise*. The objector, as Hume describes him, takes Hume to be committed, in consequence of his view that «all reasonings are nothing but the effects of custom», to the belief that «our judgement and imagination can never be contrary, and that custom cannot operate on the latter faculty after such a manner, as to render it opposite to the former» —in other words, that experience and habit can never be misleading because that, in the end, is all that knowledge itself amounts to.⁴⁸

But we can, and *ought* (Hume's word) to regulate our judgements about cause and effect by means of «general rules» —rules which enable us to separate «accidental circumstances from the efficacious causes»:

The following of general rules is a very unphilosophical species of probability; and yet 'tis only by following them that we can correct this, and all other unphilosophical probabilities.⁴⁹

So far, then, Hume's account of irrational belief forms practically a caricature of an Enlightenment theory of progress. Irrationality is a matter of jumping to hasty conclusions through ignorance. What dispels illusion is the steady accumulation (and organisation) of data. But why on this account, one might ask, should mankind be subject to the particular delusion that all beings are like themselves? And where do the emotions —hope and fear— come in? In answering these questions it becomes apparent that Hume's theory is a good deal more sophisticated than at first sight appears.

The Natural History of Religion suggests two answers, one, as it were, negative and the other positive, to the question of why we personify nature. The first is, indeed, a consequence of ignorance: it comes from our attempt not simply to find causes for events, but to make those causes intelligible to ourselves. Hume's own account of the ultimate explanation of reality is a characteristically «disenchanted» and materialist one:

Could men anatomize nature, according to the most probable, at least the most intelligible philosophy, they would find, that these causes are nothing but the particular fabric and structure of the minute parts of their own bodies and of external objects; and that, by a regular and constant machinery, all the events are produced about which they are so much concerned.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Treatise*, p. 150.

⁵⁰ *The Natural History of Religion*, p. 29.

But, lacking such a view of the world, the «ignorant multitude» employ their imaginations in forming some «particular and distinct idea» of the unknown causes which govern their lives —indeed, philosophers themselves are hardly exempt from such illusions.⁵¹

The positive answer complements this: men are led to form beliefs about the causes governing the natural world not from purely speculative motives but because of the effect —both fortunate and unfortunate— which the natural world has on their lives. In that case, we can see the following association: what is pleasurable has something benevolent as its source, what is painful something ill-disposed. The resemblance lies not so much at the purely perceptual level of resemblance (the cloud is taken to be an army because it looks like an army) as at the level of causal generalisation (a man hurts me because he wishes me harm; a stone hurts me so it must wish me harm too).

But it is the account he gives of the interaction between emotion and belief which takes Hume's account beyond the naive picture of the gradual accumulation of enlightenment. In outline, the theory is exceptionally simple:

(1) For an idea to be believed is for it to have a «force and vivacity» by which it approaches that of an impression. That, as Hume always insisted (to the despair of his commentators) is all that belief amounts to.⁵²

(2) When we are in the grip of a passion our feelings are thereby aroused.

(3) This emotion transfers itself —leaks over, as it were— to any idea which happens to be present, thus increasing its force and increasing the propensity to belief beyond what it would otherwise be.

Hume illustrates what he has in mind in the *Treatise* with respect to the emotion of fear (the source of superstition) but what he says could equally apply to the over-optimistic emotions of the enthusiast:

... a person of sorrowful and melancholy disposition is very credulous of every thing that nourishes his prevailing passion. When any affecting object is presented, it gives the alarm, and excites immediately a degree of its proper passion; especially in passions who are naturally inclined to that passion. This emotion passes by an easy transition to the imagination; and diffusing itself over our idea of the affecting object, makes us form that idea with greater force and vivacity and consequently assent to it...⁵³

On the face of it, this account appears to be viciously circular: the «affecting object» excites its «proper passion» in the fearful person and leads them to believe in its presence. But, presumably, the fearful person is one who mistakes as fear-inspiring things which need to be fear-inspiring at all. In which case, the passion is improper, not proper, as Hume supposes —it would hardly be a sign of timorousness to be frightened by the real existence of a charging lion.

But, if we allow that there is a kind of immediate supposition on the part of the perceiver, the circle does not have to be a vicious one. The process might be something

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *Treatise*, p. 119.

⁵³ *Treatise*, p. 120.

like this: I hear a creaking on the stairs late at night. I think that it *might* be a burglar. If I am timorous, then this excites my fear and the fear itself reacts back on the idea to produce belief. Emotion converts ideas which we might *entertain* into ones we believe.

The relationship between belief and passions runs in both directions, Hume argues: belief, being more intense than a mere fancy, is better able to arouse the passions and, hence, to motivate us to action:

...the ideas of those objects, which we believe either are or will be existent, produce in a lesser degree the same effect with those impressions which are immediately present to the senses and perception.⁵⁴

What is more (though Hume does not explain exactly how) belief can counteract the passions: «despair has almost the same effect upon us as enjoyment, and... we are no sooner acquainted with the impossibility of satisfying any desire, than the desire itself vanishes».⁵⁵

Knowledge can thus, to some extent, counteract superstitious or enthusiastic irrationality. Writers on Hume's epistemology seldom fail to mention the role of everyday life in counteracting the corrosive force of philosophical scepticism, but the contrary is also important to Hume: theoretical knowledge as a remedy for delusion. Hume would not be Hume, however, if he were so sanguine as to believe that knowledge was enough to dispel all our irrational beliefs. He represents the limitations of the remedies open to us with typically Humean irony:

To oppose the torrent of scholastic religion by such feeble means as these, that *it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be*, that *the whole is greater than a part*, that *two and three make five*; is pretending to stop the ocean with a bullrush. Will you set up profane reason against sacred mystery? No punishment is great enough for your impiety. And the same fires which were kindled for heretics, will serve also for the destruction of philosophers.⁵⁶

In counteracting irrational belief, though knowledge may be of some help, it is to its emotional origins that we should chiefly look. In principle, according to the theory of association, the source of irrational belief could be in any emotion: *all* passions make one credulous. But Hume has particular reasons to single out hope and fear as the sources of enthusiasm and superstition.

Hope and fear, Hume says, arise when circumstances which would give us joy or grief are only probable and uncertain. Uncertainty is a kind of oscillation between conflicting views, none of which we can settle on: we move *between* joy and sorrow as we momentarily judge the event true or false. In this way, the passions do not cancel each other out but (since they have the same object) Hume claims, synthesize to produce a third whose «agitating» power is particularly intense. It is this oscillation which gives hope and fear their particular psychological power when it comes to upsetting the reasonable processes of judgement.

⁵⁴ *Treatise*, p. 119.

⁵⁵ *Treatise*, p. xxii.

⁵⁶ *The Natural History of Religion*, p. 54.

The connection between ignorance and irrational belief, then, is by no means as direct and simplistic as it appeared at first sight. Ignorance leads to uncertainty, uncertainty leads to hope and fear, hope and fear intensify the ideas produced by the imagination and so lead to credulity:

In proportion as any man's course of life is governed by accident, we always find, that the encreases in superstition; as may particularly be observed of gamesters and sailors, who, though, of all mankind least capable of serious reflection, abound in most frivolous and superstitious apprehensions... All human life, especially before the institution of order and good government, being subject to fortuitous accidents; it is natural, that superstition should prevail every where in barbarous ages, and put men on the most earnest enquiry concerning those invisible powers, who dispose of their happiness or misery.⁵⁷

So it is apparent that Hume's position is some way from the complacent picture of a steady «march of mind» from error to reason. Knowledge, of course, will diminish uncertainty. But not all knowledge is equal in this respect: it is knowledge of those causes which affect our central concerns —our health or our happiness— not abstract knowledge of natural laws for their own sake, which will have most effect in diminishing the kinds of uncertainty which lead to superstition and enthusiasm.

What is more, of course, the sources of uncertainty are not purely intellectual: uncertainty can have objective origins in the lives people lead as well as subjective ones in their ignorance of the state of the world. It has often been noted how far stability and predictability are central political values for Hume (so much so that Hume's phrase in the passage quoted about the establishment of «order and good government» is practically a tautology).⁵⁸ But if, as I have argued, Hume sees uncertainty as such a potent force in generating irrational belief, then the value of stability is underpinned by a kind of double argument: stability is both good in itself and as a way of avoiding unleashing the irrational side of human nature.

This, then, is the outline of Hume's theory of irrational belief which forms the background to the essay «Of Superstition and Enthusiasm». In «Of Superstition and Enthusiasm», however, Hume's intention is to confine himself, he says, «to a few reflections concerning their different influences on government and society».⁵⁹ His purpose is to point out the «different and even... contrary nature» of the two phenomena, rather than the similarity of their psychological origins.

⁵⁷ *The Natural History of Religion*, p. 30.

⁵⁸ Indeed, this supposed «conservatism» of Hume's thought may make him seem out of place in an account of the origins of the liberal tradition. I think that Duncan Forbes has dealt with this point of view quite conclusively:

«... it is not 'conservatism' but the sceptical Whiggism involved in the philosophical approach to politics which gives Hume's thought its unity and continuity. Scientific Whiggism was sceptical because it questioned the value and holiness of the holy cows of the Whigs: the justification of the Revolution... the contrast between English liberty and French 'slavery'; the 'ancient constitution' of the common lawyers and 'Commons' apologists in the seventeenth century and later modifications; the wickedness of the Stuart kings... It is hardly surprising that this sort of thing appeared in the eyes of a good Whig like Horace Walpole, as 'Toryism', or worse». D. Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1975) p. 139.

Hume gives three reasons why, *even if* human beings are prey to religious enthusiasm, this does not present the kind of danger to settled and civilised society that superstition does. First, the initial violence of religious enthusiasm tends, Hume argues, to diminish of its own accord: «religions which partake of enthusiasm are, on their first rise, more furious and violent than those which partake of superstition; but in a little time become more gentle and moderate». ⁶⁰ Enthusiasts are, at least, *responsive* to toleration.

Second, there is the idea —entirely consonant with Locke— that enthusiasm is not a political danger as such. Despite (or, indeed, because of) the violence of their religious convictions, the enthusiasts do not constitute the kind of monopolistic ecclesiastical force which presents the chief danger to religious and civil liberty. They are inclined to trust their own authority in religious matters (that, of course, is the source of their delusion) and so are less susceptible to the development of priestly power.

Finally, their objective position is such as to make the multiplicity of enthusiastic religious groups «friends» to civil liberty. ⁶¹

Neither the rigid observances of the superstitious nor the fanatical self-certainty of the enthusiasts are traits which Hume finds at all attractive. But what makes superstition so dangerous is the way in which it is maintained in existence by groups «whose interest is concerned to support the religious spirit». ⁶² The irrational beliefs of the enthusiasts do not fix themselves into institutions which have a force of their own, however, and so they can be accommodated without leading to disaster.

Ideas very similar to this can be found in the writing of Hume's close friend Adam Smith. Notoriously, Hume and Smith disagreed on the virtues of an established church, but their concern at the consequences of superstition for the development of priestly power (and, hence, their relative unconcern at the phenomenon of enthusiasm) is common.

Smith's remedies for enthusiasm in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776) are two: education and disestablishment. «Science», Smith writes, «is the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition; and wher all the superior ranks of people were secured from it, the inferior ranks could not be much exposed to it». ⁶³

Smith discusses approvingly the way in which, where there is no established religion, the sects multiply to such a point that they are forced to learn to tolerate one another:

The teachers of each little sect, finding themselves almost alone, would be obliged to respect those of almost every other sect, and the concessions which they would mutually find it both convenient and agreeable to make to one another, might in time probably reduce the doctrine of the greater part of them to that pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture or fanaticism, such as wise men have in all ages of the world wished to see established. ⁶⁴

59 «Of Superstition and Enthusiasm», in David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, edited by Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Classics, 1987) pp. 73-80, p. 75.

60 «Of Superstition and Enthusiasm», p. 76.

61 «Of Superstition and Enthusiasm», p. 78.

62 «Of Superstition and Enthusiasm», p. 77-78.

63 Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, edited by E. Cannan (Chicago, Ill.: U. of Chicago Press, 1976), 2 Volumes, II, p. 318.

64 *The Wealth of Nations*, II, pp. 314-15.

Had England accepted the plan of ecclesiastical government («or more properly of no ecclesiastical government») proposed by the Independents («a sect no doubt of very wild enthusiasts») at the time of the Civil War, this scheme, Smith argues, «though of a very unphilosophical origin,... would probably by this time have been productive of the most philosophical good temper and moderation with regard to every sort of religious principle». ⁶⁵

Smith's approach to enthusiasm is in many ways less sophisticated than Hume's, however: he gives much less emphasis to the recalcitrant emotional origins of irrational belief and so he is perhaps more naively optimistic about the effectiveness of disinterested knowledge and the «market-place of ideas» in dispelling its delusions. Here, as always, Smith's confidence in the underlying benevolence of the social order was far greater than Hume's more cautious awareness of the ever-present possibility of disaster.

VI

At the beginning of this paper, I suggested that it was my purpose to put the very simple model of a connection between liberalism and empiricism via the distinction between facts and values to the test. My first conclusion is that the model is just that: too simple. Clearly, whatever is at stake in the arguments concerning religious enthusiasm, it is not non-cognitivism or the distinction between facts and values. What is striking, indeed, is that, though Hume *does* make a distinction between facts and values, he makes no use of it to separate off the political or religious sphere from the domain of rational argument.

Where epistemological considerations are at work in the debate over enthusiasm, they concern such issues as: What is the proper authority over belief? and: What are the circumstances under which beliefs are reasonably formed? not any distinction in kind between the subject-matter of religious, moral or political beliefs, on the one hand, and beliefs about empirical reality on the other. The epistemological condition for a liberal theory of toleration seems to be the view that claims to religious knowledge should be submitted to fundamentally the same criteria as other beliefs — a view which follows from but by no means requires an empiricist epistemology.

This is not to say that the distinction between facts and values plays no role in the tradition of British liberal thought: it does, indeed, play a significant one, I believe. But it enters that tradition later than might be supposed. ⁶⁶

My second conclusion is that epistemological considerations form only a part of a theory of toleration: any satisfactory account of the problem of religious enthusiasm must deal, too, with the causes and consequences of irrational belief. One of the reasons

⁶⁵ *The Wealth of Nations*, II, pp. 315.

⁶⁶ The origin of the idea that the important dividing line is that between referential uses of language and expressive/emotive ones, and that poetry (and perhaps also religion and morality) are on the latter side, is discussed with immense perceptiveness and authority in M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953). The implication of Abrams's discussion is that the idea that «science» and «feeling» should coexist in separate spheres entered English culture as a kind of post-Romantic compromise in the course of the nineteenth century.

why Hume's thought on the matter has a particular claim on our attention is that he endorses neither Hobbes's pessimism (which suggests that irrational belief is an ineradicable part of human nature) nor the meliorist confidence of the nineteenth century that civilised societies were now beyond such dangers: irrational belief, for Hume, is a permanent political problem, but not an entirely intractable one.

Hume's remedy, part intellectual, part institutional, is a vital ingredient in his defence of modern commercial society, which alone, he argues, is capable of reconciling man's natural «love of gain» with the need for security and stability. But, whatever one may think of such political prescriptions,⁶⁷ they are the product of a unique attempt to construct a theory which connects belief, emotion and social organisation to each other.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to an episode in twentieth-century political thought which has a striking resemblance to the earlier response to enthusiasm. Just as the political thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century had drawn a distinction between the reasonable diversity of religious beliefs and the unreasonable and dangerous enthusiasts, so, in the Cold War years, many liberal thinkers were to set the limits of the liberal polity in relation to «ideologists». The nineteen-fifties were, as Alasdair MacIntyre has put it, «a decade of immoderate claims made on behalf of what its defenders took to be moderation».⁶⁸

Here, too, there was an epistemological dimension to their claim. The characteristic of the ideologist was supposed to be that he is «totalitarian» —the ideological world-view lays claim to exclusively validity. But this, it was argued, is just to make the mistake of confusing value-judgements with statements of fact. So, again, an epistemological doctrine was used to establish the limits of toleration —in this case, however, a distinction drawn from the doctrines of contemporary logical positivism.⁶⁹

Any theory of toleration which is entitled to be taken seriously must, of course, include an account of the limits of toleration. But the answer cannot be narrow the circle of toleration into triviality in this way: if the condition of toleration is that religious, moral and political beliefs be completely subjectivised then liberal society will, indeed, be the kind of impoverished realm of individualist alienation its critics charge. That the liberal argument for toleration does not have to take this form is, perhaps, the lesson to be drawn from earlier thinkers.

⁶⁷ Many, of course, find them most sympathetic: Miller's —superb— edition of the *Essays* was produced under the sponsorship of the *Liberty Fund Inc.* of Indianapolis, «a foundation established to encourage study of the ideal of a society of free and responsible individuals».

⁶⁸ A. MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (London: Duckworth, 1971), p. 3. See C. Waxman (ed.) *The End of Ideology Debate* (New York, N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1968) for a representative sample of writings on the subject.

⁶⁹ «a value judgement disguised as or mistaken for a statement of fact I shall call an 'ideological statement'», Gustave Bergmann, quoted in R. Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1981), p. 14.